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ABSTRACT

A discussion of ellipsis, the omission of information from a communication, argues that the fairly precise logical notion of ellipsis as used in philosophical analysis can be applied in the sociological study of ideology. It is proposed that ellipsis is a simple explanation of the workings of the language in which much potent ideology is embodied, that sensitization to ellipses can help expose ideological confusion, and that through this exposure, rationality can be promoted. The focus of the analysis is semantic ellipsis. Elliptical sentences of this type are grammatical, are often unambiguous and with a known context, and appear ro be perfectly meaningful. However, what is omitted is the main bearer of evaluative weight, so that agreement and commitment can be obtained for the speaker's values and aims, with no necessity for the speaker to specify or defend them. It is suggested that an understanding of how this form of ellipsis works can be an intellectual tool in counteracting ideology in which there is no other room for critical response. (MSE)

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Ellipsis and Ideology

E.P. Brandon
(1984)

The periphrasis, or circumlocution, is the peculiar talent of country farmers;... the ellipsis, or speech by half-words, of ministers and politicians.[1]

The study of thinking, and of how to improve thinking, sometimes focuses on fairly technical, formalizable issues such as have been studied by logicians, at other times on extremely diffuse problems raised by ordinary argument, propaganda, advertizing, or ideology. There are few bridges between these kinds of concern. I wish to lay the foundations for one such bridge in this paper. I shall try to show that the notion of ellipsis as used in philosophical analysis can be fruitfully applied in the sociological study of ideology. Ideology is not only to be studied; it is, I believe, to be exposed. I hope that sensitizing people to ellipses can contribute to this exposure of ideological obfuscation, but I shall not try to show this now - my examples may, however, suggest some of the possibilities.

I

The notion of ellipsis is in fact something of a dark horse in the philosophical stable. It is used by various authors in different contexts, but no-one, to the best of my knowledge, has ever examined it carefully and thoroughly.[2] It would appear that philosophers have borrowed it from grammar and stylistics without much attention either to its use there or to the ramifications of its philosophical employment. But it can be made philosophically respectable, at least for the

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purposes of critical logical analysis.

Very roughly, one could say that traditional examples of ellipsis fall into two distinct groups, with a more contentious set of cases that fall between the two main groups. I shall label the two main sorts of ellipsis 'grammatical' and 'semantic', the contentious kind will be called 'structural'. In all cases, the root idea of ellipsis is of "words understood", components of a sentence that have been omitted but which must be understood to be there. One difference between the three groups lies in the motivation for supposing that something has been left out. It should be obvious that the root idea of words understood is very unspecific, but I think some uses of the notion can be illuminating.

Examples of grammatical ellipses arise from two main sources: dialogue, and some compressed grammatical structures. Thus if I ask <u>How did you get here?</u> you might well reply simply by saying <u>By bus</u>, which would have to be understood as elliptical for something like <u>I got here by bus</u>. In general it is clear that a context of dialogue allows, indeed often requires, a certain amount of such rule-governed ellipsis, in which what would otherwise not be counted as grammatical sentences can stand as complete utterances.

What I am calling compressed grammatical structures are a mixed bunch whose members depend in part upon one's grammatical theory. A few examples should give a feel for this sort of ellipsis, though different authorities might not accept all of the following (I indicate the position of the elided component

by writing / /): Mary's car is faster than John's / /; He said / / I might stay; No-one can / / or will refuse; or, for a literary example, The court of Arcadius indulged the zeal / /, applauded the eloquence / /, and neglected the advice, of Synesius.[3]

Another type of ellipsis that I want to group along with these grammatical cases, although it is in fact a question of semantics, arises from the dropping of an obvious qualification. Thus a daily is in origin and in meaning a daily newspaper; and a group of lawyers would naturally interpret talk of an action in a way different from a group of philosophers.

I want to group all these types of ellipsis together as grammatical because they are philosophically uninteresting. Talk of ellipsis here is motivated largely by appeal to paradigmatic sentence types which can be deformed or contracted (Matthews' term for my "compressed" (1981, p. 42)) in various circumstances. In general the omissions are obvious, which is why it is often pedantic to draw attention to them. This is not to say that these kinds of ellipsis are uninteresting for linguistics; the pity is that they are of limited extra-linguistic concern - they are not likely to reveal very much in the study of thinking or of value formation or indeed of the semantic side of language itself. And so the focus on these sorts of ellipsis detracts from the value, for our purposes, of, for instance, Lyons' survey of semantics (1977) or Sandell's studies of linguistic style and persuadability (1977).[4]

Besides noting grammatical ellipses, the traditional study

of language has also stressed the fact that people leave a lot unsaid, that the context of utterance contributes a very great deal to the meaning of what is said. In logic, Aristotle noticed that people often leave whole premises unstated, yielding enthymemes; in stylistics, Quintilian observed that many incomplete sentences (such as If you don't stop talking, I'll ....) require detailed knowledge of the context of utterance to be deciphered. Coming to more recent times, Jespersen can speak for many in his discussion of what he called "suppression":

> As in the structure of compounds, so also in the structure of sentences much is left to the sympathetic imagination of the hearer, and what from the point of view of the trained thinker, or the pedantic schoolmaster, is only part of an utterance, is frequently the only thing said, and the only thing required to make the meaning clear to the hearer. (1924, p. 309)

It is this tradition that philosophers have taken over, without noticing how far it diverges from the sort of grammatical ellipsis the stricter grammarians were prepared to accept, and without trying to pin it down by specifying how one should find or fill in this sort of ellipsis and what its boundaries might be (cf. Goffman, 1981, p. 67, for a similar criticism from another viewpoint - the whole of Goffman's first chapter is a lucid demonstration of the complexities of contextual and grammatical ellipsis in conversation).

Before showing what I think is the viable component in the philosophers' appropriation of semantic ellipsis, let me mention the category I labelled 'structural' ellipsis since it too may have inspired some of the philosophical adaptations. Very roughly, many different grammatical theories have wanted to analyze certain

constructions as involving more or less obligatory deletions of grammatical units. So some have wanted to see What I said was true as reflecting an underlying That which I said was true, or again I want to visit Paris as involving something like I want that I visit Paris. One obvious danger in such approaches is to evade the falsification of grammatical claims: if you really want all sentences to have a subject or a finite verb, it can be too easily arranged by appeal to this sort of ellipsis. But despite the dangers, grammarians cannot seem to do without some appeals to ellipses of this kind (thus Jespersen (1924) is critical of Sweet, pp. 103-4, but is prodigal with his own kind of structural ellipsis in what he calls a 'nexus', p. 143; for more recent discussion see Allerton, 1975, and Matthews, 1981, ch. 8). While these kinds of analysis have close links with logical analyses, in linguistics they are inspired by grammatical theory, not logical theory, and so, despite their fascination, they do not often raise issues of a philosophically interesting kind.

What, then, are the philosophers getting at when they talk of ellipsis? It is not, I think, any and every omission from what is said. Indeed, any attempt to capture those would lead to chaos since there is always something more that could be said. A useful notion of ellipsis must be kept distinct from the general idea of lack of specificity. The useful notion is, I think, focussed on those items that have not been stated but which are necessary for the truth-value of what is said to be determined, or rather such items that have not been catered for by appeal to

the normal semantics of proper names or token-reflexives. Filling in such an ellipsis allows us to give a determinate sense, true or false, to what was previously an indeterminate claim. Such a view can be found in the following two representative quotations from philosophers who have explicitly talked about ellipsis:

> When in ordinary speech we name some opinion as probable without further qualification, the phrase is generally elliptical. We mean that it is probable when certain considerations, implicitly or explicitly present to our minds at the moment, are taken into account. We use the word for the sake of shortness, just as we speak of a place being three miles distant, when we mean three miles distant from where we are then situated, or from some starting-point to which we tacitly refer. (Keynes, 1921, p. 7)

> Until we know, or form beliefs about, the appropriate filling, we have no complete understanding of these sentences. We know (up to a point) the meanings of the words they contain, and (perhaps) their syntactic structure; but we have no idea which conditions would make the sentences true or false. (Platts, 1979, p. 168)

As may perhaps be obvious, these brief characterizations do not settle everything. I am, for instance, inclined to disagree with Platts about one of his examples, Rudy is attractive. As he says, Rudy may be attractive as a ballet dancer or as a dinner guest, and the bare sentence does not tell us how. But rather than see this as ellipsis, I would see it as closer to a kind of lack of specificity created by attaching an existential quantification to a predicate: Rudy is married is perfectly determinate since married means married to someone , and similarly one might wish to analyze attractive as attractive in some respect . But it is not peculiar to judgments of ellipsis that they depend on one's wider theoretical framework.

In semantic ellipsis something is l ft out which must be replaced for anything determinately true or false to be said. In many cases the elided element is very obvious and can be easily recovered. If your car chugs to a halt with the fuel gauge reading 'empty' and you say It needs some gas, it does not take much perspicacity to realize that it needs gas to start going again. In other cases the elided element may be so taken for granted that it is unobvious: Swinburne (1968) argues that a claim like Kingston is 60 miles from Ocho Rios omits mention of a frame of reference which is necessary for measuring distance and for identifying places. It takes an Einstein to reveal some of our ellipses.

But the kind of case that most concerns me is different from either of the above. In those cases there is something quite definite elided, something that is either immediately available to the people concerned or deeply hidden in a shared framework of assumptions. But the cases of ellipsis that are most important for proponents of clearer thinking do not necessarily involve anything definite; rather the semantically gappy sentences accurately reflect an indeterminate meaning. The people do not have anything definite in mind, while the language appears to keep them afloat. In such a context the philosopher's appeal to ellipsis is more a critical move than a description of what people have in mind. As Sloman said, it is "less important here to give a strictly accurate account of what people actually do say than to suggest what they might say if only they knew how" (1970, p. 394). So when, for instance, educators say that we need to

encourage creativity, no-one has a clear idea of what end this might achieve (if indeed they have any clear idea of the means being advocated). Whereas in the case of the empty gas tank language allows us not to be pedantic, here the same linguistic resources allow the perpetuation of intellectual smog.[5]

II

While ellipsis may not have received much attention from philosophical logicians, ideology could fill libraries. Rather than enter into debates about the most useful notion of ideology, I shall simply record the conception I shall be using:

> An ideology is a system of concepts, beliefs, and values which is characteristic of some social class (or perhaps of some other social group, perhaps even of a whole society), and in terms of which the members of that class (etc.) see and understand their own position in and relation to their social environment and the world as a whole, and explain, evaluate, and justify their actions, and especially the activities and policies characteristic of their class (etc.). (Mackie, 1975, p. 185)

It is essential to this conception that "at least some of the beliefs and concepts in the system are false, distorted, or slanted" (ibid.) though this certainly does not mean that everything in an ideology is false or distorted; indeed, as Mackie argues, there are good reasons to think that a fair amount will be simply true. It is also essential that an ideology be in a group's interests; it will in general contribute somehow to the group's flourishing. In the primary case, the group in question will be the group which subscribes to the ideology, but it is also possible for other groups to adopt an ideology which is contrary to their own interests while supporting the interests of some other group.

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The question I want to ask of ideologies as Mackie portrays them is how they persist. They are cognitive systems, value systems, in some respects false or distorted, which are expressed and transmitted, in part at least, in language. They give an account of reality, but they also conceal it; they promote partial interests, but they have an air of obviousness or naturalness about them. How is the trick played?

There is of course no reason to expect a single answer to this question. Ideologies are made up of diverse elements, as are their false or distorted parts, and the mechanisms whereby they are appropriated are almost certainly going to be diverse too. Mackie himself suggests, for instance, that the way facts and values are intertwined in much of our language contributes a great deal to the transmission and reception of ideology:

> A system of concepts, beliefs and values will be more stable and more effective in controlling and justifying conduct if the evaluative aspect is wrapped up in the concepts and beliefs, if those who have the ideology see things-as-they-are as exerting certain pressures on them. Slanting the news reports is a more potent form of propaganda than printing a rousing editorial alongside a neutral and objective report. (p. 195)

And in a famous phrase, Stevenson has pointed to the way "persuasive definitions" can exploit the semantic lack of specificity of many widely used terms while retaining their emotional or evaluative aura (1963, ch. 3). I do not wish to decry the importance of these phenomena, but only to suggest that semantic ellipsis is another and often distinct route for the transmission of ideology.

Before looking at some possible examples, let us review the proposed mechanism of ideological reproduction. Elliptical sentences (as always from now on, these are cases of what I have labelled 'semantic ellipsis') are perfectly grammatical. They

therefore do not call attention to themselves. As has been noted, such sentence types are very often unambiguous and determinate in context since everyone in that context knows perfectly well how to bridge the gap that has been elided. They therefore look like perfectly meaningful sentences. Even when participants are unable to specify precisely what has been omitted, they can often think of possible plausible fillings, or of particular instances in which the claim seems true, or merely suppose that there must be some such cases. I shall label these 'particularizations' and I suggest that they might be exemplified in the case of my earlier example We need to encourage creativity by thoughts such as If we want more interesting television shows, we should encourage creativity, or remembering a relative's child, If John's urge to draw abstract designs hadn't been frustrated by his teacher, he might not have dropped out of school, or utterly unspecifically, We're sure to have a better society if there was more creativity. None of these helps specify what the original claim might mean, nor do they confirm or disconfirm it, but I suggest these, or thoughts like them, can help people think that they really have understood something definite in the original claim, and something moreover that is true. With such particularizations to back them up, the elliptical claims are easily accepted as part of one's stock of "knowledge". But since, as we shall soon see, what is elided is very often the main bearer of evaluative weight, agreement and commitment can be obtained for the speaker's values and aims without him ever having to specify what these are, much less defend them.

Let us see how this is meant to work. Take a typical child at school. People can be easily persuaded that woodwork or plumbing (or designing computer software) is relevant for him (if not for her), while playing the piano or studying Tacitus is irrelevant. But a little reflection reveals that X is relevant/irrelevant for A is semantically elliptical: to decide whether a subject is relevant to a person (these are the givens of this example) we have to add some kind of end or purpose. Plumbing is relevant if you want to be able to fix the toilet or if we want to cut down on professional plumbers, but almost certainly not if you want to be a classical philologist. When we specify to what something is relevant, we have a question of truth or falsehood (though it might be difficult to answer or still be somewhat vague). Before we specify the end, we are floundering, although many people seem blissfully unaware of their predicament.

While the full claim, X is relevant for A to achieve F, expresses a matter of fact, there is obviously also an evaluative issue waiting in the wings. Typically, we would only be asking whether X is relevant for A in the light of our commitment to some values of F. Our values, our aims, fit into the F slot, but it is this slot that is normally elided. Even if we do use the full form, we are not thereby stating that F is to be pursued; the evaluation is implicit in the context of utterance - I would not normally waste your time telling you what is relevant to achieving F, G, and H unless I were endorsing those goals (or opposing them) but my value position is not part of what the claim means.

The factors that are in fact valued tend to be omitted. Claims are accepted because particularizations can be found. Thus, given the present situation of our pupil, there is a fair chance that he will need to fix the toilet or a tap, so learning how to do so is relevant for him; whereas he is not likely to want, or to be called upon, to play a piano. As far as likely present roles go, the one is relevant, the other irrelevant. So the claims, thus particularized, are plausible. But since the particularization is tacit, it is not brought out into the open so that people can recognize that it refers to present roles rather than to the likely, or merely possible, roles a person may play several years or decades down the line. Nor can it be seen to ignore the various other aims a person concerned for education might set the school system.

I have tried to show how talk of relevance is elliptical in a potentially damaging way (in general agreement with Barrow, 1981, pp. 34-7, although we differ on the precise place of the evaluations). Elsewhere I have done the same for talk of needs (1980) and equality (in my 1984), and I have shown that the quantificational indeterminacy which language permits can wreak havoc even with very careful thinking (1982a). Talk of responsibility (cf. Mackie, 1955) or opportunity is equally elliptical, with the result that much time and energy is wasted pursuing indeterminate issues couched in these terms. Perhaps the importance both of the issue and of ellipsis as I see it will permit us to glance at one more area, that of freedom.

The abstract noun *freedom* allows us to note an important source of lack of specificity that is related to the grammarian's structural ellipsis. Such abstract nouns are best understood as transformations from their related predicate expressions, in this case *is free*. Semantically this predicate is elliptical for *is free to V*, and such an infinitive phrase can quite easily be inserted when the predicate is used. But although it is still possible, it is not so natural to insert the infinitive phrase when one moves to the abstract noun. One can talk of freedom to *V* or of the freedom to *V*, but neither are so quick off the tongue as the simple *freedom*.

But if this suggested analysis is on the right lines, all talk of freedom or of a free society is elliptical; determinate sense can only be given to *freedom to V* or *freedom to W*. This ellipsis permits political rhetoric to try to conceal the facts that these specific freedoms are often not widely shared, perhaps not obviously beneficial, nor obviously compatible with other desirable goals (including other freedoms); it tries to restrict us to virtually empty but rousing talk of freedom *simpliciter*. It is amazing, for one with a faith in rational argument, to observe the endless debate about the supposed incompatibility of freedom and equality, when both these terms are full of holes and there are only determinate (and often easily answerable) questions about whether the freedom to *V* on the part of *A* is compatible with an equality between *A* and *B* with respect to *F* (for generally good sense here see Carritt, 1940, and Norman, 1982).

The political ideology of freedom exploits an obvious ellipsis. But there is also a more diffuse ideology of metaphysical freedom, which can be illuminated by reference to ellipsis. For this, I suggest we dig a little deeper into talk of being free to uncover the negative skeleton of all talk of freedom, ability, and its simple associate, the modal auxiliary verb can. The point of talking of a negative skeleton is that a claim like I can drive a car is to be understood as saying that There is no obstacle to my driving a car. Some such analysis is by now fairly popular (cf. Graham, 1977, pp. 254-255). To find the ellipsis, we have to notice that obstacles come in various kinds - there are sheer physical obstacles (our anatomy is such that we cannot fly like birds; we cannot have breakfast in London and lunch on Mars; etc.); there are obstacles created by normal, though not invariable patterns of behaviour; there are legal obstacles; there are moral obstacles; there are logical obstacles. Usually when we talk about what we can or cannot do, about our freedoms, we presume that we are talking with reference to some such obstacle field. Perhaps, given that field, there was no obstacle to my doing what I did nor to my doing any number of other things - I could well have done otherwise. But when the determinist affirms that in fact I couldn't have done otherwise (which apparently contradicts our ordinary belief) he invokes a quite unusual obstacle field, viz. the sum of all obstacle fields, the whole universe. With respect to all the obstacles there might be, the determinist may be right, but his claim is compatible with our

ordinary common-sense when this is interpreted as elliptically referring to some much more homely field of obstacles. Dr Johnson's assurance that our will is free is thus sustained by the generally elliptical invocation of a limited range of obstacles.

I have concentrated on pointing to ways in which ellipsis helps to perpetuate error or acquiescence; but very little in this world is that simple. The lack of specificity due to elision can be exploited on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Not only are fillings opposed to the dominant fillings possible, but the mere elliptical notion can contain a standing invitation to find such fillings; it has, as it were, some power of its own which can be used in the fight of truth and justice against the deadweight of unthinking privilege. Thus while admitting that an ideological appeal to equality can gloss over practically any situation, Corbett adds that to use it at all:

> is to accept a point of substance; it is to accept, at least, the relevance of asking, in any practical situation, whether there may not be some respect in which the people in question should not be treated more similarly than they are; it is to be prompted to look for respects that have been overlooked, and others that are new. (1965, p. 181)

III

Many students of society have written at great length on ideology. I am not alone in thinking that these students have not in general paid much attention to the precise mechanisms whereby ideologies are perpetuated. In a fairly recent review Kellner said that "the sociology of knowledge ... showed astoundingly little interest in any detailed study of the

structure and mechanisms of social communication" (1978, p. 325), and Garland's forthright claim, "there are two central questions one can ask of ideology: what are its origins?; what are its effects?" (1981, p. 128), suggests that sociologists are not going to be overly concerned with m worry about how an ideology manages to stay alive. While sociolinguistics and sociology are now alive to linguistic problems, they do not seem to pay much attention to the more strictly logical issues I am pointing to. Perhaps the artificiality and formalism of much work in logic has falsely suggested that it has little bearing on how people actually think or on the mechanisms whereby their confusions are perpetuated.

But questions of transmission are, however, of some interest, not only in their own right, but also, in the context of social explanation, because the easy reproduction of ideology seems to clash with the rationality assumptions built into such explanations. The whole question of the degree and kind of rationality implicit in social explanation is too large and controversial to tackle here, but I think it would be generally agreed that we assume other people share with us a physical environment, some of whose ways of working they grasp as well as we do, and that we assume they act, in general, to achieve their purposes. However weird and wonderful some of their ideas and practices may be, there must be some such core (not necessarily the same in every case) of shared world and minimal rationality. This further implies that people can, in some measure, distinguish

truths from falsehoods and better from worse arguments or reasons. But of course it does not mean that they must be able to pontificate in the second-order style of logical appraisal, although in fact many people can do so. More needs to be said to square these remarks with the truths contained in talk of "theory-laden" observations and elsewhere that beckon the unwary into the quagmire of cultural relativism, but this is not the place to say it. All I need now is agreement that we must attribute some minimal good sense and rationality to our fellows in order to understand them at all. How much more we attribute seems as much a matter of temperament as of empirical evidence - it may be worth remembering here that good sense in one area is compatible with utter credulity in another - so I shall only note that the problem this essay addresses arises more insistently the more rationality one accords people. It is perhaps only worth raising if one thinks people fairly sensible.

Outside the religious area, or rather the theological portion thereof, beliefs are within reach of evidence, proposals can be seen to have consequences. So falsehood, gross distortion, and gross partiality ought not to survive, especially when their contents have a central importance in people's lives. But error, distortion, and partiality are precisely the <u>raison d'être</u> of secular (and of course also religious) ideologies. There is a strong temptation to see people who wholeheartedly accept such ideologies as radically incapacitated, dupes of a false consciousness from which they can only be awakened, if at all, by the stern voice of a miraculously clear-sighted authority.

But if it can be shown that the beliefs in question are held in accordance with general principles of evidence and inference, then we can perhaps hope that a man who cannot, in the miasma of ideology, tell a hawk from a handsaw, could yet do so when the hidden is made visible, and do so on the basis of intellectual skills he already possesses.

The task is, then, to give a certain amount of logical respectability to our normal dealings with elliptical claims, our normal talk about needs, equality, responsibility, and so on. Semantic ellipsis permits fallacies of equivocation, but the mere fact that it is semantic ellipsis - so that the sentences used are perfectly grammatical - allows such shifts of meaning to be hidden. Since one can reason quite happily with symbols or nonsense words or approximations to grammatical sentences, elliptical claims can figure in arguments without appearing to malfunction.

Elliptical claims are protected by another pervasive feature of our thinking: the tacit qualification of often tacit general principles. Even when we do rise to explicitly saying something of the form All A are B, we rarely mean it: everyone usually conveys a much less straightforward quantification, everyone in our kind of society, perhaps, or most people we have met, or typical people, or everyone except children, idiots, and peers of the realm (cf. Hodges, 1977, pp. 191-197). Similarly principles or maxims are not usually to be taken literally. Given that one can infer from Some A are B to All AX are B, where the X slot stands ready to receive enough qualifications to make the inference valid,

qualifications of the sort that would normally be left unsaid, the fact that one can very often find what I earlier called 'particularizations' to support elliptical claims means that one can much too readily assume that such particularizations have validated the general elliptical claim.

While one must admit that these general, and inescapable, features of our thinking may sometimes excuse what might appear fallacious, it must also be acknowledged that people do not do very well on the overall consistency of their beliefs, nor do they recognize simple fallacies as well as they can follow valid arguments (cf. Ennis, 1981, Nolan and Brandon, 1984). But the point remains that semantic ellipsis, and its errors, trade on generally acceptable thinking strategies. The resulting confusions need not be a sign of irremediable incapacity; one might even hope that they can be recognized for what they are with a little mental therapy.

IV

In the preceding section I claimed that the persistence of ideology needs explaining, preferably as a quasi-rational process, and that the prevalence of semantic ellipsis can assist us in that task. To substantiate those abstract claims, I propose now to take a few remarks about ideology and to indicate briefly how ellipsis could help to round them out. In taking these examples, I am not necessarily endorsing their accuracy; I am only concerned with them now as typical of remarks made by students of ideology.

My first examples come from some recent essays by Michael

Apple (1979) which typify much recent work in the sociology of education. At one point he claims that hegemony requires fundamental agreements at a tacit level, which are transmitted by his version of the "hidden curriculum":

> The controversies usually exhibited in schools concern choices within the parameters of implicitly held rules of activity. Little attempt is made to focus on the parameters themselves. The hidden curriculum in schools serves to reinforce basic rules surrounding the nature of conflict and its uses. It posits a network of assumptions that, when internalized by students, establishes the boundaries of legitimacy. This process is accomplished ... by nearly the total absence of instances showing the importance of intellectual and normative conflict in subject areas. The fact is that these assumptions are obligatory for the students, since at no time are the assumptions articulated or questioned. (p. 87)

While Apple's own example concerns the routinization of subjects as uncontentious bodies of knowledge by the school system, his way of talking and his later references to "social norms" learnt "by coping with the day to day encounters and tasks of classroom life" clearly suggest the relevance of the kind of insinuation of values by means of ellipsis that we looked at earlier. The factors that carry the evaluative weight, that set the terms of the debate, tend to be elided and so are imposed without being noticed. They thus easily become natural or obvious, exemplifying once again what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) style the traditionalism of most schooling, its refusal to enunciate its own ground rules.

In several other places Apple notices the prevalence of tacit assumptions (cf. p. 34, p. 83, p. 125f) and our resulting tendency not to question the framework of debate (cf. my account of our moral thinking in similar terms, 1979, 1982b) but he

does not tell us how the cognitive resources we use aid and abet these restrictions. Semantic ellipsis surely helps. It contributes to an explanation of his claim that:

> The orientations which so predominate curriculum and educational theory ... effectively obscure and often deny the profound ethical and economic issues educators face. (p. 149)

It also helps to explain, and make consistent with the stress on the tacit nature of ideology, another point Apple makes: ideological rhetoric is fairly explicit and systematic about what <u>can</u> be agreed upon (p. 21f). Ellipsis allows an audience to particularize claims so that each person can accept them, but no one need ever ask whether my way of accepting them is consistent with yours; we all subscribe to the same elliptical claim unaware of the yawning chasms that separate what we have in fact accepted. Semantic ellipsis can be added to the list of ways in which, "where claims are vacuous, vague, imprecise, ambiguous and generally unclear, conflicts are likely to be minimized and go unnoticed" (Naish, Hartnett, and Finlayson, 1976, p. 99).

One other point Apple makes is that ideological categories tend to be "essentializing" (p. 135). This seems analogous to the way in which ellipsis can encourage false belief in absolutes when the realities are relative. Apple's examples, 'slow learner', 'discipline problem', may not all involve ellipsis, and his point may not be exactly the same as mine, but there are parallels; and it is perhaps worth noting that a slow learner is presumably a slow learner of <u>A</u> and <u>B</u> but not necessarily of

everything the school might have on offer.

One writer who has focussed on the transmission of ideology is Trevor Pateman (1980). One of his more controversial suggestions is that many people simply lack the conceptual structure required to handle political or social debate (ch. V). One might hope to sidestep the general question of who has what conceptual resources by noting that many of the interrelated terms in question (freedom; responsibility; authority;...) are usually used elliptically. The result is a very diffuse conceptual foam, in which these terms connect with each other but with many gaps. It is not surprising that people easily get lost and find it hard to hold onto occasional insights. (I have already adverted to the sorry state of debate about equality and liberty among people who are not obviously among Pateman's incapacitated workers or children.)

The fluidity of the standard terms of political debate is a constant theme in Nigel Harris' discussion of ideology (1971). His metaphors and comments continually invite a gloss in terms of semantic ellipsis, as I have explained it above. Thus in talking of the move from equality to equality of opportunity he says:

> Very little remains of a concept thus subject to the acid of political debate in which at least one side finds it useful to redefine the other side's basic demands so that they become unobjectionable. What does remain is a blur, in which anyone can identify with the concept on nearly any grounds, even though the grounds on which two people identify with the same concept are mutually contradictory. (p. 24)

But one cannot in general redefine someone's words and get away with it - whatever Humpty Dumpty might have said - though

in politics it keeps happening. I suggest that it is not so much that equality is redefined into submission, but that it is elliptical from the start, so that it only retains its force when people remember to specify which respects they are really interested in; if that happened, and also if one remembered to ask which opportunities were in question, people might not find themselves so easily driven into emasculated notions of equal opportunities.

Again, in discussing the intellectual sin of taking remarks out of context, Harris adverts to the very features that encourage both grammatical ellipsis at one level and ideologically powerful semantic ellipsis at another:

> The logic of debate disciplines, reshapes and, indeed, creates the positions of an ideology, even though the essence of those positions derives from a given social situation. That social situation is also crucial for understanding the ideology, for people do not at all have the same perception of events: a flat disc may appear circular from one position, but a thin strip from another. (p. 54)[6]

But a remark can only be credibly abused out of context if it leaves a crucial part of its meaning in the context, which is precisely what semantic ellipsis encourages. I suggest that semantic ellipsis provides a plausible answer to the question that frequently arises of how it is possible for ideology, as Harris and others characterize it, to flourish among normally intelligent people. No doubt there is much more to be said, but at least we have one important part of the answer.

V

I have tried to show that a fairly precise logical notion has a part to play in explaining the workings of ideology. The phenomena to which ellipsis gives a name have been widely noted in philosophical discussions, if not always carefully distinguished from a general lack of specificity; the fact that ideologists trade on confusions, indeterminacies, and other semantic faults is also well known. Semantic notions have indeed been brought to the analysis of ideology before (as in Naish, Hartnett, and Finlayson, 1976), but I do not know of this precise pairing elsewhere.

One point of stressing this particular mechanism, as indeed of stressing mechanisms at all, is to be better able to counteract ideology. There is a danger that students of ideology and its transmission will characterize it in ways which do not leave any obvious room for common-sense to respond critically. How to take arms against mystification so arcanely described? But ordinary people only have common-sense, so if that can't provide the intellectual tools, they will not be able to defend themselves intellectually. I stress ellipsis because it is a very simple (no doubt from the standpoints of logic and linguistics, an absurdly oversimple) explanation of the workings of the language in which much potent ideology is embodied. It therefore suggests itself as a valuable tool in the promotion of critical rationality; "appropriate technology", perhaps, for the members of this conference.

Footnotes

1. "Martin Scriblerius" The Art of Sinking in Poetry, ch. XIII.

2. The discussion in this section is derived from an unpublished paper, 'The Secret History of Ellipsis'.

3. Edward Gibbon The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ch. XXX. The ordinary examples were suggested by the article on ellipsis in Fowler (1983).

4. In his experiments Sandell takes ellipsis simply to be grammatical ellipsis but in his discussions he notes that "style may be conducive to persuasion by confusing the cognitive powers of the receiver" (p. 154) and refers to work by Hansen, in Danish and unavailable to me, on the way in which a standard of comparison is often left unstated: points that cohere with the characterization I shall use of semantic ellipsis.

5. See my 1980 for a detailed discussion of the verb to need. Since I have mentioned the possibility that there can be implicit existential quantifications, it might be worth spelling out why that solution will not work here. Very simply it is because A needs X for some end or other (instead of the elliptical analysis A needs X for Y) will always be true, whereas we treat claims about needs as easily falsifiable. But for I need a bottle of Lafite every day to be false, we must be assuming some restrictions on the possible fillers of the Y slot; to live in the manner I aspire to it is true that I need Lafite in virtually endless amounts.

6. Lacking the tools I have offered here, Harris' intuitions sometimes let him down - in chapter 8 he gets embroiled in relativism, which is one issue ellipsis should help one escape. But it might be worth noting his remark on Burke (p. 210) for another instance of ellipsis allowing one to omit what is evaluatively fundamental.

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